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A Tapirapé Comes of Age
[Um Tapirapé atinge a maioridade]

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[Title page]

101 [16] The Tapirapé Indians live in central Brazil north of the Tapirapé River, a left tributary of the Araguaia located in the extreme south of the state of Pará. They speak a dialect of Tupi-Guarani, the most widespread aboriginal tongue in Brazil. In spite of a great decline in their population, they still posess a rich cultural tradition which is peculiar to them and which distinguishes them [173] from other tribes. Their customs and traditions are transmitted orally with great care from generation to generation. One of the most 961 interesting among them is the ceremony in which the youth assumes the status of a grown man. This change in status is marked by nearly all peoples. Among us, when a young man reaches the age of 21, he can vote, marry, sign documents, etc.; among many primitive groups, the youth proves that he has become an adult by undergoing torture or achieving success in the hunt.

Among the Tapirapé, this tradition is observed with a festival [302] of song and dance called "hair-tying," for henceforth the young man will wear his hair tied at the back of the neck in adult fashion. For 958 several years before the ceremony, the boy keeps his body painted [302] black with genipap, wears his hair cropped close to the head--"like a monkey," in the words of the Tapirapé-- is subjected to food restrictions, and has his arms and legs scarified until they bleed so he [304] will "grow strong." When he reaches 14 or 15 years of age, his [852] family decides that the time has come for him to become an adult.

88 At the close of the rainy season, the time of harvesting and [221] time of plenty for the tribe, the "hair-tying" ceremony is carried out. For months beforehand, the youth allows his hair to grow until it comes [302] down to his shoulders. Meanwhile, mother and aunts weave threads [462] (cords) to adorn him, while father and uncles collect feathers with [283] which they make elaborate ornaments. All Tapirapé youths become [297] adults through this rite; the sons of important men, however, and [854] those who were "favorite sons" (the Tapirapé elect certain children to preferential treatment) are much more richly attired than the others. The ceremony is costly to the family, and much time is needed beforehand to gather the necessary materials--macaw tail feathers, chest [297] feathers of the blue macaw and parrot, breast fluff of wild ducks, cotton threads for the ornaments, and beads. All these items are [556] [955] valuable to the Tapirapé, who gauge their own wealth in these terms.

881 On the eve of the ritual, the preparations begin. The youth's
[302] body is painted black with genipap. On his face, a black line is drawn under the mouth and a circle under the eyes, which are elongated with a line at the corners. The father or uncles put the last
[946] touches on a large diadem. At dawn on the day of the ceremony, the youth is led to the large ceremonial house built in the center of the Tapirapé village, and his hair is set to support the large
[292] [237] ankungitana (diadem) made of numerous macaw, parrot, and duck feathers fastened to a base of muriti palm and hard wood and weighing about five kilograms. The hair is trimmed and tied into a roll
[302] on the nape of the neck with a cord at least five meters long, to
[301] provide a base for the fastening of the large diadem. The lower lip is adorned with a ceremonial quartz tembetá [Tr., cylindrical plug].

The ceremony itself begins late in the morning. For 24 hours
[535] the youth dances continually, surrounded by his fellow tribesmen and accompanied by the songs and dances of men and women. He dances ill at ease, for he is soon tired by the weight and discomfort of the
773 ornaments. Tapirapé tradition explains this ritual as a test of en-
881 durance for the young men. According to one legend, a Tapirapé ancestor called Xavanamu and his son Makanci were captured by an enemy tribe. Xavanamu was eaten, and his son was forced to dance under the weight of a large diadem and the numerous ornaments that covered his body. At the end of a long day of dancing, Makanci, who had retained his strength, managed to flee and disappeared into the woods followed closely by his foes. He vanished on reaching a large hollow trunk. Nowadays, Tapirapé youths wear ornaments similar to those left behind by their ancestor.

In 1941, when we witnessed the "hair-tying" of the youth
881 Kanctiampiã, several Tapirapé predicted that he would cry "for he would become very tired during the night," but the boy stood up valiantly to the test. It is in another way, however, that men recall their initiation. One of them said, "When I danced, I was more beautiful than at any other time." It is true that at no other time of life does the individual get so much attention and make such a show with such rich ornament. And this during adolescence!

Thus, the Tapirapé turn this ceremony into an opportunity for fun, which their men recall more or less in the same manner as our youths recall their first ball.

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884 At the time that follows planting the young man must work in the gardens, and henceforth he will participate in the hunt, thus proving his ability to marry and support a family.

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Tapirapé Indian in the Coming-of-age Dance.